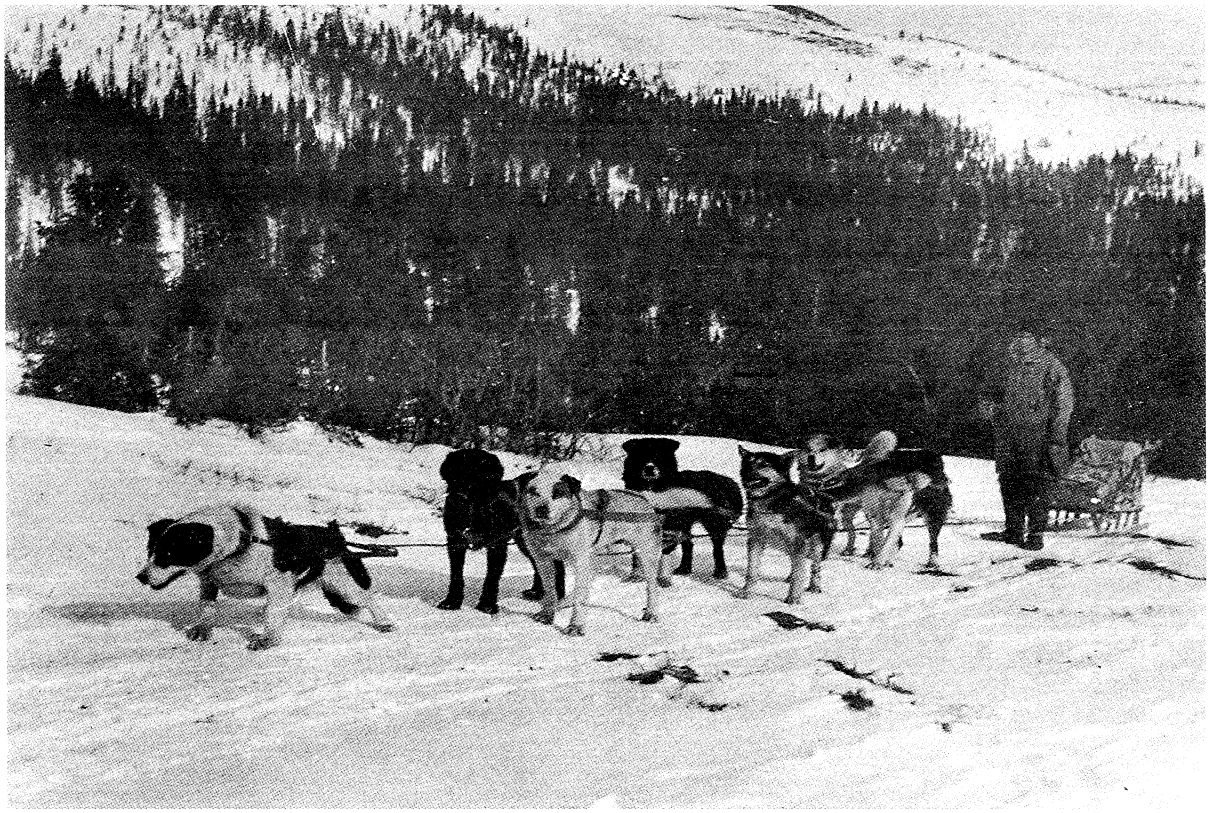
IDITAROD

NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAIL



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U. S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

Trail History

By following game trails and using geography to their advantage, Alaska Natives created a network of trails in Interior Alaska. In the early 1800s segments of these trails, later to become the Iditarod Trail, were used by Russian-American Company explorers. The Russians introduced the harnessing of dog teams in-line for better control, instead of the traditional method of fanning the dogs in front of the sled.

Glenbow Archives, Calgary, Canada (NC-1-133)

Traveling on the trail was a challenge for even the hardiest of pioneers.

American explorers and prospectors followed the same paths. After the United States purchased Alaska in 1867, early prospectors used steamboats and pole boats on rivers and streams during the summer to explore the vast Alaskan wilderness. Long overland summer treks were next to impossible because of Alaska's boggy terrain laced with wide rivers. During the winter, lakes were covered with snow and ice. This icy transformation made the Iditarod Trail the favored winter route by those traveling to the mining districts.

In 1908, the Alaska Road Commission formally surveyed, cleared, and marked the trail. Roadhouses, dog mushing mailmen, gold shipments, and scheduled freight service made the Iditarod the link between many communities in western Alaska for two decades. Miners, entrepreneurs, families, investors, and adventurers all followed the trail in its heyday from the pre-World War I years until the 1920s.

The trail takes its name from the 19th century Athabascan Indian village on the Iditarod River near the site of a 1908 gold discovery. By 1910, the gold

Nevada Historical Commission / Kay Pittman Collection

King Island Eskimos and oomiak at Snake River, Nome.

rush town of Iditarod flourished as the center of the Iditarod Mining District. Trails used for trade and commerce by Ingalik and Tanaina Indians were improved by and for the miners.

The trail was officially surveyed by the U.S. Army's Alaska Road Commission in 1910 and dubbed the Seward to Nome Mail Trail.

Dog teams and sleds were the most popular mode of travel. Six to 20 dogs, depending on the weight of the load, were harnessed to pull a freight-laden sled. The sled dogs on the historic Iditarod Trail were a scruffy mix of mongrels and big-boned working dogs. Some travelers trudged from roadhouse to roadhouse on snowshoes. Occasionally, someone rode a bicycle over the trail. Horse-drawn freight sleds carried everything from passengers to pianos, mining equipment to fine bone china and kerosene lamp chimneys.

The most glittering and costly cargo was gold, freighted to Seward for shipment to "The States." But perhaps more prized was word of family and friends, and news of the world carried by mail sleds linking mining towns and Native villages to the outside world.

In 1924, bush pilots began flying the mail, freight, and passengers in and out of mining camps and villages along the Iditarod Trail. Air service eventually eliminated the need for the trail. By 1930, most of the roadhouses had closed and mining towns shrank to villages occupied by a few stubborn sourdoughs.

These Alaskans continued to use dog teams for trapping and local travel until snowmobiles came into prominence. In the 1950s, dog teams began to disappear.

The Iditarod Trail was forgotten for more than 40 years until the 1960s, when interest in racing was renewed. Dog musher Joe Redington, Sr. of Knik and historian Dorothy Paige of Wasilla set out to save Alaska dog sledding from extinction; in 1967, they helped stage the first Iditarod race between Knik and Big Lake; the return on nine miles of the old Iditarod Trail.

The next race was held in 1969. In 1973 the first race was run between Anchorage and Nome. Today, the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, internationally known as "the last great race," is staged each March and includes competitors from around the world. It is a test of stamina and knowledge that pits mushers and dog teams against some of the harshest conditions on the continent.

Other sporting events provide additional challenges. The Gold Rush Classic, a snowmobile race from Big Lake to Nome and back, is the premiere snowmobile race in Alaska. The Iditasport, held on the trail near Big Lake, includes cross-country skiing, mountain biking, snowshoeing, and foot races.

Hardy souls still travel the forbidding landscape of the historic Iditarod Trail each year in search of adventure.

Dorothy Paige

Joe Redington, Sr.

Towns of the Trail

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Seward, an ice-free port, was a place of docks and dogs in the early 1900s. Much of the freight hauled during the winter entered Alaska at Seward.

The last major Alaska gold rush occurred on the Innoko River in 1909. At the upper limits of navigability of the Innoko River, the town of Iditarod sprang up. Iditarod had telephones, electricity, automobiles, and handsome buildings with steam heat.

Alaska State Library/Basil Clemons PCA 68-89

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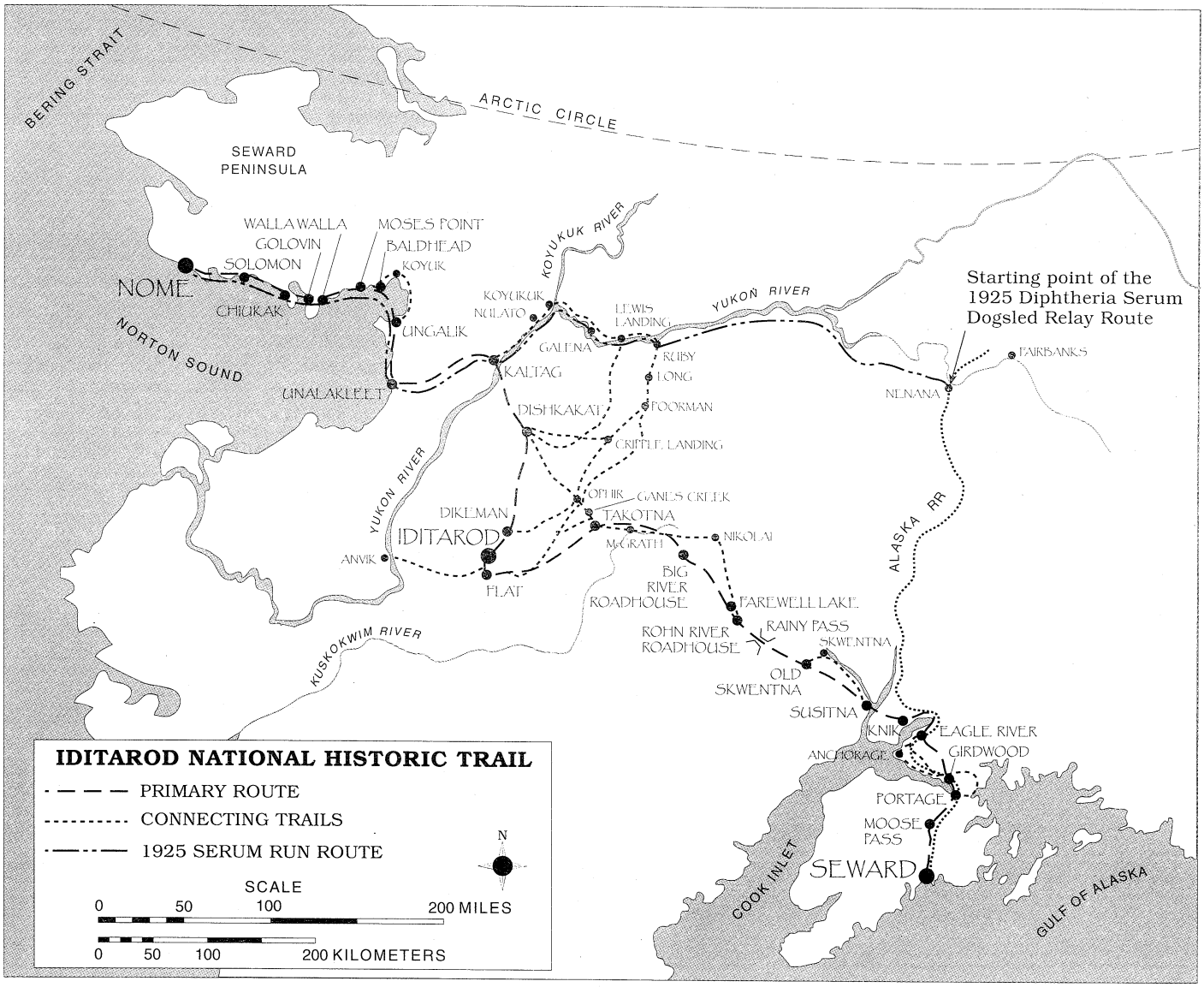
For eight months. Each autumn, Bering Sea ice isolates Nome from sea transportation After a survey in 1908, the Iditarod Trail became Nome's winter link to the outside world until air travel. Today, an electric light shining on the spire of Saint Joseph's Catholic Church guides sleds along the last miles of the Iditarod Trail to Nome.


BERING STRAIT
ARCTIC CIRCLE
SEWARD PENINSULA
WALLA WALLA
GOLOVIN
SOLOMON
MOSES POINT
BALDHEAD
KOYUK
NOME
CHICKAK
UNGALIK
NORTON SOUND
UNALAKLEET
KOYUKUK RIVER
KOYUKUK
NULATO
LEWIS LANDING
YUKON RIVER
GALENA
KALTAG
RUBY
LONG
FOORMAN
DISHKAKAT
CRIPPLE LANDING
YUKON RIVER
OPHIR
GANES CREEK
TAKOTNA
DIKEMAN
IDITAROD
McGRATH
NIKOLAI
ANVIK
FLAT
BIG RIVER ROADHOUSE
FAREWELL LAKE
ROHN RIVER ROADHOUSE
RAINY PASS
SKWENTNA
OLD SKWENTNA
KUSKOKWIM RIVER
SUSITNA
KNIK
EAGLE RIVER
ANCHORAGE
GIRDWOOD
PORTAGE
MOOSE PASS
SEWARD
COOK INLET
GULF OF ALASKA
NENANA
FAIRBANKS
ALASKA RR
Starting point of the 1925 Diphtheria Serum Dogsled Relay Route
IDITAROD NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAIL
PRIMARY ROUTE
CONNECTING TRAILS
1925 SERUM RUN ROUTE
N
SCALE
0 50 100 200 MILES
0 50 100 200 KILOMETERS

Trail Management

Who owns the Iditarod trail? The Iditarod is a complex trail system, stretching from Seward in the south to Nome on the Bering Sea. It crosses lands owned by several Native corporations, municipal governments and the State of Alaska, as well as federal lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Department of Defense. There are 10 institutional land managers and numerous private owners.

The Iditarod Trail is the site of three major competitive events each winter. BLM evaluates potential environmental effects of each event, issues authorizations, and checks compliance during and after the activity. Spectators often travel to key viewing sites during events, set up a barbecue and take part in the Alaska version of a tail gate party.

Since the Iditarod was designated a National Trail in 1978, the BLM has collected much of the trail's history, crafted cooperative agreements, and begun the work of nominating sites to the National Register of Historic Places.

As a National Trail, the Iditarod is managed under terms of a comprehensive management plan prepared by the BLM, the federal agency appointed coordinator for the trail. This plan establishes a common guide to promote the preservation, use and enjoyment of the historic route. It also identifies the trails and sites making up the historic trail system, and initiates cooperative agreements among the various land managers and owners to mark and sign trails, provide access points and manage events.

Assisting in this effort is Iditarod National Historic Trail Inc., a non profit volunteer organization. This group provides guidance on aspects of trail management such as the design of trail markers, cooperative agreements, and competitive events.

The Iditarod Trail Blazers and other volunteers provide trail maintenance and construction assistance.

What are National Trails?

The Iditarod National Historic Trail is one of a number of trails designated by Congress in recognition of their significance as scenic, recreational, or historic transportation routes. The Iditarod was specifically designated for its historic importance. The trail system was created to provide areas of hiking and other outdoor recreation opportunities for an ever-expanding urban population.

Winter recreational opportunities on the Iditarod Trail include snowmobiling, dog sledding, and cross-country skiing. Avalanches are a danger along portions of the trail, but with proper maps, knowledge and experience, opportunities for self-directed recreation abound.

Unlike the Appalachian or Pacific Crest national trails, which are located near heavily populated areas, most of the Iditarod is in remote sections of Alaska. The Iditarod is known as a winter trail because most use occurs when the tundra and rivers are frozen and easier to cross. There are some summer hiking trails along the old route.

The best opportunities for recreation during the summer are close to Seward and Anchorage. North of Seward, the Forest Service and a volunteer group, the Iditarod Trail Blazers, have created 14 miles of hiking trails along the old Iditarod Trail route. The 27-mile segment of trail east of Anchorage over Crow Pass to Eagle River in Chugach State Park is a popular hike and is the annual site for a running marathon. The 30 miles of trail east of Nome also provide a summer hiking opportunity.

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